Such exchanges have tended to become less bitter in recent months, however, as naturalisation processes have accelerated and bilateral relations with Russia have improved.

However, Kozyrev reiterated a familiar complaint in his speech when he accused Estonia and Latvia of using legislation to "push out" Russians.

Lithuania, with the smallest proportion of ethnic Russians (under 15 percent), has the most liberal citizenship laws and has seldom had any conflict with Moscow on this issue.

Newspapers in the region gave a largely muted reaction to Kozyrev's remarks, interpreting them as aimed at a domestic audience.

An Estonian Foreign Ministry official said its diplomats in Moscow had asked the Russian Foreign Ministry for "clarification" of the speech.

Latvia's Foreign Ministry said it would probably comment on the matter later on Wednesday.

MOSCOW, April 19 (Reuter) - Russia should ignore any accusations of renewed imperialism in deciding whether to use military force to protect ethnic Russians abroad, Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev said on Wednesday.

A day earlier, in a clear reference to ethnic Russians who live in ex-Soviet republics, he said there might be cases when Russia would have to intervene militarily to defend compatriots.

"This (statement) was not a slip of tongue," Kozyrev said at the celebrations of the 300th anniversary of the founding of the Russian navy on Wednesday.

"I do not accept attempts to tie our hands with non-ending talk about the Brezhnev doctrine or useless speculations about the revival of the Russian imperialism," he said.

Under the so-called Brezhnev doctrine, named after then Soviet president Leonid Brezhnev, Moscow reserved a right to use force against allies to stop any undesirable developments.

"If the lives of our citizens are under threat and there is no other way (to save them), I am sure President (Boris Yeltsin) will issue the order, parliament will approve it and the armed forces will carry it out," Kozyrev said.

More than 20 million ethnic Russians live in the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania and in the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States grouping all other ex-Soviet republics.

Among states where interests of ethnic Russians were deemed to be insecure, Kozyrev named Kazakhstan and the Central Asian states of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. But he said only Estonia and Latvia had used the law to push Russians out.

All former Soviet republics reject Moscow's accusations of discriminating against ethnic Russians.

Kozyrev said on Wednesday Russia was not the first to declare it might use force to defend compatriots.

"I oppose the gunship diplomacy, but there are many examples when other states have sent their aircraft carriers, cruisers or whatever they have far away from their shores to protect their citizens. And that was justified," he said.